

**Bryssel 30 september 2010**

My name is Ninni Smedberg, I am an ordained deacon and the director of Vårsta Diakonigård in northern part of Sweden. I am a former member of the board of Eurodiaconia and have had the function of being the vice president for 7 years. Now I am here to represent diaconal organisations and to bring the perspective of years of tangible experience to our debates.

Diaconia, as you may know, is the concrete implementation of Christian love, meaning service to and for people in need. At our different diaconal institutions we work every day to be with the most vulnerable, to serve people to get better today and equip them for tomorrow. We also train deacons and other professions and laypeople for diaconal service, developing practical diaconal and social work often with cooperations with others.

Vårsta Diakonigård has been a centre of diaconal knowledge for almost 100 years. Today we are working with family counselling, being a crisis and catastrophes centre, having a good and safe living for elderly and offering an rehabilitation for people without a job (specially young people) or people on long sickleave. We are also trying to be a workplace for people that can not take ordinary jobs. From tomorrow I am also responsible for a rehabilitation centre for drugaddicts. It unites diaconal work in Sweden with international diaconal work and cooperations with churches, organisations and commercial partners. We know that we can not work alone and that for our work not to be a drop of water in the sea we need to cooperate with as many as possible. This cooperation allows us to adopt the necessary holistic approach, looking at different areas of a persons needs.

I think that people in general are more happy and satisfied living in equal societies. There is even research work proving this. So it is not only about how money makes people happy but how societies with small gaps between rich and poor makes us feel more comfortable. We have a Swedish expression and that is “enoughness”, I do not need more, probably most of us in this room have enough. We have enough. Our society has become more and more individualistic and we are having difficulties to see how we actually are depending on each other, both locally and globally.

That means it is never enough only to “help” people with food and so on but also “help” societies to see how to perform and set frames for a good living for all people. To do that it needs cooperations and forum were we can share experiences. Also authorities on all levels must listen to ours experiences. Grass roots organisations experiences from praxis is the key to more equal societies.

Let me give you one example from my organisation and my work.

Our social security system, in Sweden, has change rather dramatically the last years. More people then before ends up between the chairs of different authorities. People who have been sick (for ex. with so called burn out symptoms) and off job for years have difficulties to find their way back to their work again. Together with the local authorities and community we have build up a rehabilitation work that we can offer this people. The same work is been done with young people having difficulties finding their first job. For this work and these people we have built a beautiful garden and have formed a new methods with so called “green rehabilitation”. We have a research worker connected to this work and we have such good results that makes even him surprised. Our focus is, together with the power of nature, to empower people to see their own possibilities, their own strength and their way back to working life again.

I know that some of you might be reluctant to involve social stakeholders in policy making. It is not time for generous social policies and increasing funding for social actors. I know that if I speak about the need for more equal societies, some of you might just see a wishful naïve Christian ideal, and reply to me with the reality of an unprecedented economic and financial crisis. It is not the time for generosity but time for tough decisions and some austerity. I agree.

However, today I want to warn decision makers to be aware of the burden the most vulnerable of our societies can carry. In our diaconal organisations in Sweden we see it every day. Continuing on the current path is not possible. People suffer not only of their condition, but of the injustice our society is producing. The situation for single parents (mothers) and homeless are more difficult then ever. Also in Sweden the poverty of children has grown. Institutions as for examples our city missions fighting ever day for peoples right, peoples dignity and for example to offer some kind of a living and food for the day.

Poverty and inequality are a direct threat to structures of political participation, and if not tackled will lead to the growth of extreme populist intentions and potential social clashes. We see it happening more and more all over Europe, for instance in Sweden last week the far right Sweden Democrats won for the first time 20 seats in the Parliament (and have a so called role of the balance between the conservatives and the socialdemocrates).

It is therefore not the time for generosity, but time for justice. Austerity measures and financial cuts must be shaped to target the ones most able to shoulder the shock of the crisis. They must be an opportunity to transform our

societies toward more equality, not because this is morally desirable, but because this is better for society as a whole. This is cooperation as well, giving up some of our deserved gains, so that others might have what they need. But this also means that our voice must be heard. Social actors, nearer to people in need and suffering, should be privileged partners of policy making.

But providing services, with access to all, we can only do if Governments and communities also look into the question of quality. Not only go for the cheapest solution. I can hesitate to call it social dumping but I think there is no other name. I have heard communities choose the cheapest alternative for their elderly care (dementia) even though they know that they (this company) will reduce staff to a minimum (not good for the staff and not good for the people in their care), I have heard a community saying when it comes to a placement for a drug addict in one of my institutions that even if this is not ethical to say so it is too expensive, better to let this person drink their heads off (means die as quick as possible). This is cynical and is not providing equal societies.

I am a director of an organisation based upon Christian values, if/when we have profit on what we do we always invest them into the work again (back to staff and people in need, so called not for profit organizations), I have to think in longterm with a holistic perspective for our credibility, I can never do short cuts when it comes to quality and how to treat people with respect and dignity. I use my knowledge from our every day meeting with people in need to be an agent of change, because I believe that equal societies is good for us, all of us.

Thank you...

What we expect from the EU level is how there is a serious work on all levels with action plans. That welfare is asked for with good quality and that has access for all. That also people in the margins are to be listened to, they probably have more creative solutions sometimes that is needed today.

Finally, I do not want a society where some people are depending on charity to get a welfare that everyone is entitled to. It is about justice.

Ninni Smedberg